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Review of British Abolitionism and the Question of Moral Progress in History by Donald A. Yerxa, ed.

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H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Donald A. Yerxa, ed. *British Abolitionism and the Question of Moral Progress in History*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2012. vi + 286 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61117-015-3.

Reviewed by Toby Harper (Columbia University)

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Moral Progress without Empire

The contributors to *British Abolitionism and the Question of Moral Progress in History* (which is based on a 2007 conference) are all senior (or emeritus) male professors at British, American, or Australian institutions. The seniority of all the contributors offers an opportunity to read a group of distinguished scholars reflect on weighty issues. This is especially interesting given the importance of the “question” in the title. The book seeks to push the “characteristic epistemological modesty” of historians to make a set of contextualized statements about moral progress in history “in response to the human longing for ‘big meaning’” (p.7).

With its ambitious terms of debate, this book captures some of these potential strengths of its contributors, but some of the essays are also weighed down by a kind of carelessness that indicates that the essays were adapted from conference papers with minimal editorial revision. The book is inconsistent in quality, combining a number of strong essays with a few weak ones. It is also inconsistent in theme, ranging widely across time and place while focusing much more on the latter part of the title than the former.

The theme of “British abolitionism” is thin, with a few exceptions. Eric Arneson’s chapter on the recent historiography of antislavery goes beyond survey to make an argument about the relationship between antislavery commemorations and historiography that can be applied to a much wider range of topics. Arneson suggests that academic historians need to find more ways of communicating their findings to a wider audience, citing antislavery as a prime example of an area where there is a disconnect between popular and academic narratives. Jeremy Black situates British antislavery in the wider context of European diplomacy, while David Hempton makes a more specific argument about the way in which evangelicalism shaped moral sensibilities in Britain. Hempton points out that Methodist antislavery in the eighteenth

and early nineteenth centuries was contingent and erratic. These two essays both succeed in balancing the specifics of the historical context with the wider theme of moral progress. However, other essays wander far from Britain, and in some cases, from antislavery. Even David Bryon Davis’s survey concentrates as much on America as it does on Britain, while later chapters drop any relation to Britain in order to focus on American religious history. Jon H. Roberts and George M. Marsden address the relationship between slavery and American liberal and conservative Christianity respectively, abandoning any real connection with British abolitionism. These essays are interesting and sometimes thought provoking, but they are only half related to the title of the book.

“Moral progress in history” is the stronger theme, and the authors take it up in two main ways: a contextualized analysis of how historical figures and groups conceived of moral progress and the question of whether moral progress itself is a historical reality. Peter Harrison, Alan Megill, Bruce Kuklick, and Wilfred M. McClay avoid Britain but offer interesting (albeit brief) discussions of the intellectual history of progress. The choice of historians and philosophers is idiosyncratic in all these essays, but they are generally successful. Megill’s discussion of progress in Immanuel Kant in particular casts the question of moral progress in an interesting light. C. Behan McCullagh attempts a synthesis of the historiography of antislavery with a concept of historical inspiration that takes Jesus as probably “the most inspiring person in human history” in that Christianity demands its followers follow his particular example (other religious figures go unmentioned) (p. 132). While interesting, this essay gives the distinct impression that it was the script for a talk that had undergone minimal revision before being published. It is broad and short, and jumps between ideas with little contextualization or elaboration. Sadly, it is not the only essay like this: provocative without ex-

plaining their provocation.

The authors are divided over whether there has been moral progress in history, but they do not really engage with one another: even Felipe Fernández-Armesto's pessimistic conclusion, in which he questions the usefulness of moral progress as a theme for historical analysis, does not really speak to the specifics of the rest of the book. There is no real debate between the authors, with a few minor exceptions. Only Donald A. Yerxa's energetic introduction attempts any real synthesis.

However, the biggest problem in the book from the perspective of readers of this list, across both the weak and the strong chapters, is the absence of any discussion of empire. This is most glaring in economist Gary M. Walton's chapter. According to Walton, the difference in prosperity between Western countries and the rest of the world is historically and in the present primarily the product of the West having more open, globalized economic institutions. Walton claims that from 1750 "while the rest of the world slept, and changed little economically, Europe and England's colonies in America advanced" (p. 170). Yet this was clearly not the case: the economies of the "rest" did not remain static as European and American prosperity exploded in the eighteenth century. Indian, East Asian, and African economies were transformed by imperialism.

While most of the other contributions are more carefully historically contextualized, empire (and the substantial literature on the relationship between empire and antislavery) barely figures anywhere else in the book. Europe and North America are central; the rest of the world is very much a distant periphery. In his thorough

summary of the diplomatic history of European antislavery, Black hints at the global dimensions of the transformation of the labor market resulting from abolition, but his conclusion suggests out of nowhere a comparison with the Islamic world without actually making an argument about this comparison. Two or three authors allude to Islam in a similar fashion, without offering any strong argument, let alone analysis. Readers are left with only innuendo, in spite of extensive scholarship on Islam and slavery. Perhaps this is not surprising, but it is disappointing, given the cultural significance of slavery in the Muslim world to the West's ideas about slavery, Islam, and moral progress. The notable exception is Lammin Sanneh's essay, which offers a much more detailed survey of the legal status of slavery in nineteenth-century Islam, and attempts a comparison with European Christian attitudes in the same period. However, he too avoids making a strong conclusion.

This is not a bad book, but its purpose is unclear: it is neither an introduction to the problem of moral progress in history, nor a deep meditation on it. The essays are too brief to be major contributions, and too varied and unstructured to serve as a coherent introduction. The bulk of the text is also Euro- and Christo-centric. Greater intellectual diversity would have improved the analysis of the big question debated within. While it offers a number of provocative suggestions about history and moral progress, it is less satisfactory as a history of British abolitionism, let alone slavery as a historical global institution. Some of the individual essays are interesting or entertaining, but the book as a whole comes across as unfocused and strangely narrow in its view of history and of the world.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

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